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English Revisited:

Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials

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Editorial

In this issue we have taken a respite from verb tenses and have turned our attention to one of the smallest markers of meaning, the comma. A marker of meaning? Well, yes, the use or non-use of commas can certainly change the meaning of a sentence. Learn ten basic guidelines regarding the use or misuse of commas and you are bound to make fewer mistakes.

In this issue we will also explore the topic of low-context and high-context cultures, which was touched upon in our piece from Istanbul in our last issue, and see how this can lead to misunderstandings and cultural faux-pas when speaking English.

Slip-ups in English can also be avoided by acquiring a set of phrases used to make polite requests. Read on to learn a few phrases.

Upcoming Issues :

- if clauses
- fixed expressions in cover letters
- agreeing and disagreeing in English

Do you have any ideas for future issues?

Please contact us.

John Nixon

A Request of our Own

The Language Center has an earnest request to make of our readers. We were wondering whether any institutes would have a room in Vaihingen that we could use on a regular basis for our classes. The room should seat 25 people. Students would greatly appreciate it if we could hold more language classes in Vaihingen. Unfortunately, we have not been able to fulfill this request because we do not have a room of our own. Any offers would be most welcome. Simply click on **Comments** if you can help us out.



Comments



Subscription

Glossary

respite: break

be bound to: very likely to

slip-up: mistake

acquire: gain

earnest: serious and sincere

Currently on Offer

If you are interested in any of the following, please **contact us**.

- **Coaching: Free** one-on-one coaching is available during the winter semester. This is especially helpful if you are preparing for a presentation or planning a new course in English.
- **Workshops in November and December:**
 - Accent Reduction and Voice Training:** November 9, 13 and 16 (9:30 to 12:45)
 - English for Academic Communication:** November 19 (8:30 to 11:45)
 - Socializing in Academic Contexts:** November 27 (8:30 to 11:45)
 - Academic Vocabulary Expansion:** December 4 (8:30 to 11:45)
 - Academic Writing:** December 7, 11 and 14 (8:30 to 11:45)
- **Editing Service:** Do you have a paper, abstract or other document that needs to be looked over by a native English speaker before it is published? If so, we can help.

Grammar

Coping with Commas

When it comes to punctuation in English, the comma poses the most difficulties for German speakers. While in many cases the use of commas is optional in English, there are certain instances where a comma must be used and ones where it cannot be used. The following 10 points will help our readers avoid the most common mistakes.

Glossary

cope:

deal with a difficult situation

when it comes to: concerning

string together: link

full stop/period: Punkt

incidental: not important, by the way

laud: praise

Misuse of Commas (,) = common comma error

- 1) Probably the most common mistake made by German speakers is placing a comma between an independent clause (*Hauptsatz*) and a dependent clause (*Nebensatz*) introduced by words such as *that, what, where, if, whether, when, why, because, who, etc.*
I didn't know (,) where I should register. (Ich wusste nicht, wo ich mich anmelden sollte.)
The students thought (,) that the course was well run. (Die Studierenden meinten, dass der Kurs gut durchgeführt wurde.)
- 2) The same difference in punctuation can be found in infinitive constructions, i.e. *zu + Infinitiv*.
She asked me (,) to answer her e-mails during her holiday.
(Sie hat mich gebeten, während ihres Urlaubs ihre E-Mails zu beantworten.)
- 3) Another common misuse of commas in English involves the stringing together of two independent clauses.
On the one hand, Apple products are more user-friendly and reliable. On the other hand, they tend to be pricey.
(Einerseits..., andererseits...)
 In this example, it is not possible to link the two clauses together in one sentence using a comma. You either have to use a full stop (Am: period) or a semi-colon.
- 4) Remember that a comma is not used with decimals. Hence, the figure \$10,000 is read as ten thousand dollars and not as ten dollars. This might save you making an expensive mistake on eBay!

Reminders about Using Commas

- 5) Commas are used in non-defining clauses to indicate that the information provided is incidental and not needed to identify what is being discussed.

Compare:

Those studies that have pointed to the benefits of regular testing of school children have been lauded.

Those studies on your desk, which have pointed to the benefits of regular testing of school children, have already been submitted for review.

The clause within the commas is extra information that the speaker/writer has added, but is not really needed. Note that *which* has to be used here instead of *that*.

Similarly, in the following examples we would use a comma because what follows the comma is additional, non-defining or non-identifying information.

We conducted several experiments, none of which succeeded.

They nominated several candidates, the majority of whom have in-depth experience.

These structures involving quantifying determiners (e.g. *none of which, some of whom, all of which*), superlatives (e.g. *the best of which, the happiest of whom*) and numbers (e.g. *the first of which, a quarter of whom*) are stylistically quite elegant.

For reminders 6 to 10, please click [here](#).

Did You Know?

The word comma comes from Ancient Greek, where it referred to a clause in a sentence. Its literal meaning is "a piece which is cut off".

(Source: [Online Etymology Dictionary](#))



John Nixon



Practice Exercises

Intercultural Communication

Low-Context vs. High-Context Cultures

In many internationally successful, export-driven German companies, a stint spent working abroad is no longer seen as 'nice to have', but has come to be seen as a necessity for any successful career path. Given a choice of destination, a number of would-be managers and professionals choose the UK. The reasons are easy to comprehend; the UK is geographically close to home, most German managers already have a sound command of the language and the British culture is often viewed as being comfortingly similar, at least when in direct comparison with Russia, India or China. Nonetheless, familiarity with the English language can prove to be treacherous if language is taken too much at face value, as the following 'critical incident' reveals.

A German executive was sent on assignment to the company's subsidiary in London for several months. One day her British colleague mentioned that he would be meeting with other colleagues later that day and that she would be welcome to join them, "if she had time." Since, in her experience, such meetings were highly spontaneous and poorly structured with lots of 'chit chat' about football and the weather, she decided it would be no loss if she didn't attend and that her time would be better spent working on her monthly report. The British counterparts were surprised and offended to see that their German colleague preferred to remain alone in her office rather than meet with them.

What was at the root of the misunderstanding here? In the terms first used by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall, Germany has a **low-context culture**. This means that communication is direct and the meaning of language is explicit. Moreover, a lot of value is placed on unambiguous and clear communication. In the mind of the German executive, therefore, she was only required to attend the meeting if she had time. Since she had no time, she chose not to attend. Simple.

In the UK, conversely, there are many situations where language does not convey the explicit meaning of the words but is used for reasons of politeness or convention. Since it would be considered very impolite to order a colleague to come to a meeting, the phrase "if you have time." is simply added by the British colleague to soften the invitation and has actually nothing to do with having time.

Where communication is concerned, the UK has a **high-context culture** or a culture highly dependent on the context or situation. People are expected to be able to 'read between the lines' and, consequently, also to live with a certain level of uncertainty about what others may mean. This ambiguity can make communication baffling for the uninitiated foreigner.

Other red flag favourites include phrases like 'with the greatest respect', which means the speaker disagrees wholeheartedly and has said something tongue-in-cheek, or 'you must come to dinner sometime' where the British would be utterly shocked if you actually asked them to name a day and time.

Cheryl Stenzel

Glossary

stint:
a period of time working

treacherous: dangerous, full of risks

subsidiary
Tochterfirma

chit chat:
smalltalk

offended:
insulted

unambiguous:
clear (eindeutig)

conversely:
on the other hand

convey:
get across
(eine Idee transportieren)

baffling:
perplexing

red flag:
warning

tongue-in-cheek:
not meant seriously



Vocabulary

Making Polite Requests

There is a grain of truth in most stereotypes. In Martyn Ford and Peter Legon's book *How to be British* there is a cartoon of an English gentleman, sporting a moustache, bowler hat and bulldog, who ignores the cry for help from a boy drowning in a river. When the boy's very bare imperative of *Help!* is, however, turned into a sophisticated polite request, the Englishman jumps into action:

Excuse me, Sir. I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but I wonder if you wouldn't mind helping me a moment, as long as it's no trouble, of course.

We needn't go to such extremes when making a request in an English-speaking environment, but we should always bear in mind that the German more "direct" way of communicating often sounds rather rude and impolite to Anglo-Saxon ears. Polite language may depend on many factors: you want to show respect to a person, your interlocutor is from a culture where politeness is expected (such as the UK), you are in a formal context like an important business meeting, or you would simply like to ask somebody for a huge favour. The British may appear somewhat overzealous when it comes to using "please" and "thank you", but remember that these magic words plus the right intonation are the foundation on which you should build your polite language.

As we all know "could" and "would" are key words for a polite request:

Could you possibly ...?

I wonder if you could

Do you think you could ...?

Would you mind (doing sth) ...?

Or the phrase: **Do you happen to know** (where I could find Ms White?)

Another essential tool is polite grammar. Instead of using the present tense you backshift your request into the past (continuous in most cases) although it refers to the moment of speaking:

I was wondering if you could ...

I was hoping to (speak to Mr Brown. Is he available?)

Did you want to (pay cash or by credit card?)

An if-clause can also come in very handy:

I would appreciate it if you could / I would be grateful if you could (lend me your mobile for a second.)

Would it be all right if I (did sth...?)

If you'll just (sign here, please.)

A polite request calls for a polite answer, of course. In particular if you have to refuse, do so politely:

That's very kind of you, but ...

I'm terribly sorry, but ...

I'd love to, but ...

I'm afraid ... / Unfortunately, ...

Believe me I would if I could, but ...

Imagine your British colleagues would like you to book a flight. They ask you to arrive at 4 pm, but you think it would be too late. In German culture you would probably give this direct, simple message: *That's too late.* By now I hope you can feel that this sounds almost insulting. So let's try the following steps. First add the common softener "would": *That would be too late.* Now include words like "a little", "a bit" or "slightly" to make the difference in opinion seem small: *That would be a bit too late.* The next step is to put your message in the form of a (negative) question: *Wouldn't that be a bit too late?* The usage of "I'm afraid" is very common in business situations: *I'm afraid that would be a bit too late.* And if you finally use "I was wondering" you create a less definite feeling and appear very polite and formal: **I was wondering if that wouldn't be a bit too late.** Perfect! Now everybody will be willing to go along with your opinion - and will be delighted that

Germans can be courteous after all.

(These steps have been adapted from Barry Tomalin's work on politeness markers)

Glossary

a grain of truth:
normally you talk about a *grain of salt*. In this context it means *some*.

to sport sth:
to have or wear sth. in a proud way; showing off a bit

interlocutor:
Gesprächs-partner

somewhat overzealous:
a bit too enthusiastic

to call for sth.:
to need, require sth.

courteous:
polite

Sylvia Grade



More Exercises